
Women in Medieval English Society

Prepared for the Economic History Society by

Mavis E. Mate

University of Oregon



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© The Economic History Society 1999

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in 10/12½ pt Plantin [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Mate, Mavis E., 1933–

Women in medieval English society / prepared for the Economic History Society
by Mavis E. Mate.

p. cm. – (New studies in economic and social history)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0 521 58322 5 (hardback). – ISBN 0 521 58733 6 (paperback)

1. Women – England – History – Middle Ages, 500–1500.

2. Women – England – Social conditions.

3. Women – England – Economic conditions.

4. Social history – Medieval, 500–1500.

I. Economic History Society. II. Title. III. Series.

HQ1599.E5M38 1999

305.42'0942'0902 – dc21 98–43628 CIP

ISBN 0 521 58322 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 58733 6 paperback

Contents

1	Introduction	<i>page</i> 1
2	Early medieval society (c. 600–1250)	5
	Religious and political life	6
	Women in the economy	13
	The legal rights of women	16
3	The late Middle Ages (1250–1530)	27
	Economic activities of women	27
	Political power, education and religious experience	61
	The legal position of late medieval women	78
	Conclusion	96
	<i>References</i>	101
	<i>Index</i>	112

1

Introduction

More has been written about medieval women in the last fifteen years than in the previous one hundred and fifty. Female authors, like the Frenchwoman Christine de Pisan, and the Englishwomen Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, have been re-discovered and new editions and translations of their works have been produced. Queens are no longer seen as mere appendages of their husbands and have merited their own biographies. Tax records and manorial court-rolls have revealed the names of thousands of women while fascinating human insights can be gained from women's wills and letters. Yet administrative records, whether those of the central government or local manorial accounts were compiled for financial and jurisdictional reasons and the women who appear in them represent just a small fraction of the total female population. Thus historians know a great deal more about widows who held property and who enjoyed legal autonomy than they know about wives whose legal identity was subsumed within that of their husbands. So, too, much more is known about women as ale-brewers, because for much of the Middle Ages brewers were regularly fined, but much less is known about women's work as laundresses and seamstresses, since they were never formally regulated. Any record, read in isolation, gives but one facet of the total picture. Wills, written by women, reveal fascinating insights about female piety and personal relationships towards the end of life, but say nothing about their attitudes and situation at other points in their life-cycle.

With the vast explosion in the material dealing with medieval women's history and the imperfections of many of the sources, considerable debate has arisen about the position of women. Is

gender, for example, more important than class? Gender determines that wives were primarily responsible for household management and child-care and that this work, precisely because it was women's work, was less highly regarded than the work carried out by men. Women, of all social classes, were depicted not only as weaker physically, but weaker rationally and morally. Women generally had a more restricted choice of occupation, and fewer opportunities for education and the acquisition of property than males in their social group. On the other hand, the material well-being of women was clearly determined by their social class. Housing, diet and clothing all varied significantly across the social scale. Furthermore, although aristocratic women enjoyed fewer rights than their brothers, they had far greater access to education, property and political power than did any peasant woman.

The opportunities available to a woman varied not only according to her social class, but also to the stage that she had reached in her life-cycle. Daughters, whatever their rank in society, were legally under the control and authority of their fathers. Wives were also subjected to the power and authority of their husbands. Generally only widows had any measure of legal autonomy. Examples of power and independence wielded by wealthy, aristocratic, widows cannot be extrapolated into a high status enjoyed by all women in that society or indeed for all women in that social class. So too a woman might enjoy more or less *de facto* freedom according to the different stages of her life. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the daughters of labourers and artisans frequently left home at the age of twelve or thirteen to work for others as servants. Away from direct parental control, they were freer to choose their own marriage partner than a young aristocratic girl whose parents saw her marriage as a means to consolidate their property or expand their network of allies. Wives, in both countryside and town, who supplemented the family income through brewing, spinning or the sale of produce, could sometimes spend their earnings as they wished, despite their husbands' legal authority. Yet the same women as widows might choose or be required to live with a married son or daughter, thus relinquishing some of their former independence. So, in talking about women, it is important to distinguish both what social class is being discussed and whether the women concerned were

daughters, wives or widows. The legal autonomy that widowhood brought was of little value if the widow herself had few, if any, resources at her disposal.

One reason for debate is that historians use different criteria to assess women's power, authority and status. For some, legal rights – the ability to make a will and to control and alienate land – is the most important factor: for others what matters is economic power – the ability to participate in the workforce and to contribute to the family income. Even more significant, perhaps, is the lens through which women are viewed. Those historians who are aware of the power of patriarchy and the limitations that it imposes on women tend to stress what women cannot do, whereas historians who emphasize women as capable and independent beings, able to cope with difficult circumstances, stress what rights and opportunities women did enjoy. Thus, whereas the first group tend to see the glass as half empty, the second group see it as half full.

Regional variation in economic development and legal custom also had a profound influence on women's lives throughout the Middle Ages. Taking care of animals, and above all work in the dairy, was always seen as suitable employment for women, but the opportunities for women to work outside the home for extended periods were obviously greater in pastoral than arable areas. Likewise, widows might have an easier time managing on their own if they could engage in pastoral husbandry which was not labour intensive. On the other hand, women were expected to help with the harvest on their own land, if not for others. In arable areas in particular the late summer months were extremely busy times for women as they juggled family and household demands with agricultural tasks.

In the century following the Norman Conquest the rules under which freeholders held their land became well defined and common to the whole country. In contrast, land held 'at the will of the lord' was subject to a bewildering variety of customs. Over much of the country, customary land followed the same practices as freehold land and went to the eldest son, but in some places land was either inherited by the youngest son, or divided equally among all sons. Provisions for widows ranged from half the holding until the heir came of age to the whole holding for life, irrespective of any remarriage. In some places tenants had the

right to sell the odd acre or half acre as family circumstances changed, whereas elsewhere lords insisted that any alienation had to be in the form of the entire holding. Such customs affected family structure and kinship ties as well as economic well-being. Life for women in the west Midlands was not identical with that for women in East Anglia.

Sources are more abundant for one class at one time period and another class at another time. This makes comparisons across classes and across centuries difficult. None the less, some historians do believe that Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed more rights than their Anglo-Norman successors. Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon period has been portrayed as a kind of 'golden age' in which men and women lived on terms of rough equality. Other historians, while accepting the notion that women enjoyed greater opportunities at one time than another, place the 'golden age' in the later Middle Ages, when, after the population losses of the Black Death, women were recruited into the labour force in large numbers. The debate on Anglo-Saxon versus Anglo-Norman women, however, focuses almost exclusively on the nobility, since the sources are not available for women in other social classes. In contrast, the discussion on the late medieval golden age revolves around the position of peasant and urban women. The whole notion of a golden age, moreover, has been challenged by historians such as Pauline Stafford and Judith Bennett who stress the continuities across time.

In the following pages I shall look at the ways in which historians have seen the position of women in medieval society from the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period to the end of the fifteenth century within two broadly defined time periods. Within each the discussion will centre on the legal rights enjoyed by women, their contribution to the economy, and their political and religious power, such as influence wielded by queens and abbesses. Attention will also be given to discussions about the existence or otherwise of a 'golden age' and to changes over time, since these are questions that have sparked considerable debate.